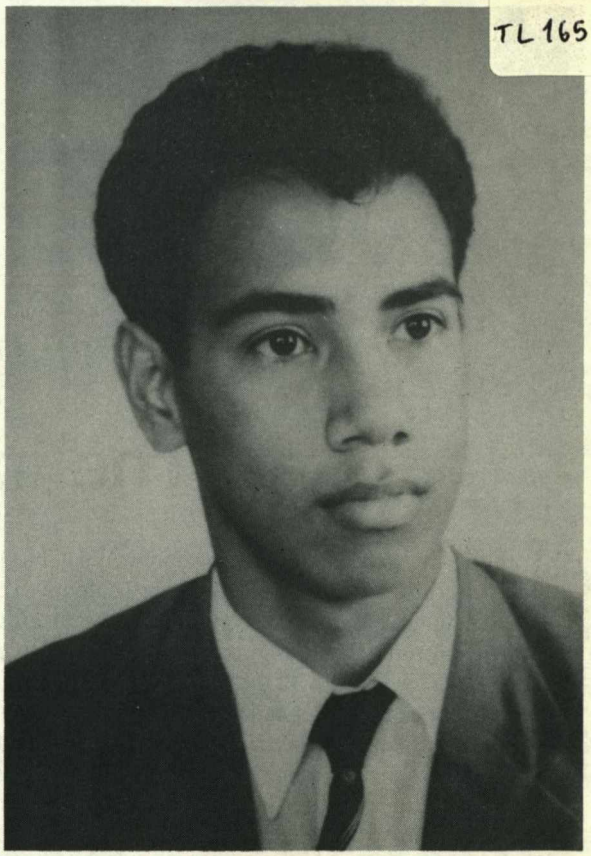
TL 1651

Xanana

*The trial of Xanana Gusmao in Dili has attracted international attention. **Louise Crowe** looks at the life of the man now facing criminal charges of rebellion and the possession of illegal weapons.*



Xanana as a young man in East Timor

Only a week after the first anniversary of the Dili massacre, Indonesian military authorities reported with some glee, the capture of the East Timorese resistance leader, Jose Alexandre 'Xanana' Gusmao. For over a decade, numerous military campaigns had failed to capture Xanana and his co-fighters who relied heavily on popular support to continue their armed resistance. His capture is a blow to the East Timorese who have looked to him as the spearhead of their campaign for independence. In the seventeen years since the Indonesian invasion, Xanana became a human symbol of the hopes of an oppressed and suffering people to live freely in their own land.

The current trial of Xanana is yet another public event which reveals the deep divisions present in this society. Being tried as a criminal under Indonesian law, Xanana is seen by many East Timorese as another victim of the illegal Indonesian occupation of their homeland. The trial, proceeding upon the premise that Xanana has committed crimes against the Indonesian state, will not address the fundamental problem that the majority of East Timorese remain unreconciled to Indonesian rule. Xanana's uncharacteristic admissions of Indonesian citizenship and criticism of the armed struggle he led for twelve years are viewed with deep suspicion by many Timorese who insist that Xanana, and any Timorese who might speak on his behalf, are not free to speak the truth.

Reports that his sister and other members of his family are still in detention, fuel this distrust. Bishop Belo, head of the Catholic Church in East Timor, has again criticised the intimidation of the people by the military forces. In an interview in mid-February, Bishop Belo claimed that the military were using 'psychological torture' to force people to accept integration with Indonesia. Along with arrests, detentions and beatings, there are reports of people being forced to drink the blood of an animal and declare their support for integration—a corrupt version of a traditional Timorese pact among tribal leaders. Such is the atmosphere in which this trial is being heard.

Amidst the speculation about the effect of Xanana's capture on the future of East Timor and the many scenarios being proposed, is a strong concern for the well-being of a man whom many Timorese describe as the most reluctant of leaders. Along with his people, he is very much a victim of decisions and interventions made about this tiny half-island by foreign powers.

Gusmao was born, the second son of nine children, in Manatutu on the 20 June, 1946. His father Manuel was a school teacher in Ossu. His sister Lita, now living in Australia, describes him as a close and affectionate brother often thought of as a 'second father' to his younger brothers and sisters. He married Emilia in October 1969. They lived in Dili and enjoyed a happy family life with their two young children, Nito and Zeni.

For six months in 1974 Xanana, unable to obtain a permit from the Portuguese to start a farm, worked as a labourer in Darwin. Attracted by the freedom and opportunity of Australian society, he returned to East Timor with the hope of emigrating with his wife and children. Perhaps it was the taste of this Australian experience that drew Xanana into a strong political involvement with the pro-independence party, Fretilin.

On the 30 November 1975, Xanana farewelled his wife and children and went to photograph Indonesian fighting on his country's border. It was the last time Emilia was to see her husband. On 7 December, Indonesia invaded East Timor with massive military force. Unable to return to his family, Xanana withdrew into the mountains with many other Timorese.

East Timor became a closed and isolated land in which thousands of people died, either directly from the war or from the hunger and disease caused by the upheaval. By the late seventies, Xanana emerged as a leader and reorganised the scattered fighters into an effective resistance network. Although Indonesia publicly dismissed the resistance as a minor problem, they continued to maintain a large military presence and kept the territory closed to foreigners until 1989. In March 1983 the Indonesian Commander, Colonel Purwanto, was forced to sign a cease-fire with Xanana which was broken by Indonesian forces some months later. In 1988 Xanana bridged East Timorese divisions by re-organising his followers into a non-partisan army. In smuggled letters, tapes and film, Xanana has constantly called for a negotiated settlement, emphasising the need for talks without pre-conditions under the United Nations auspices.

Whatever the outcome of Xanana's trial, he will continue to be a focus of East Timorese aspirations of self-determination. His charismatic leadership, analytical skills and idealism could be strong ingredients for a just settlement in this troubled land. ❑

Louise Crowe visited East Timor with Frank Brennan in late 1992. She continues to follow, and to write about, events in the area.